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ABSTRACT

The qualitative dimension of educational research methodology is explored, and the literature of qualitative methodology is reviewed so researchers may (1) understand more fully the qualitative dimension as it, in turn, fits within the parameters of educational research as a whole, and (2) have more informed access to the sometimes daunting array of literature that is available. Qualitative research is described as trying to uncover patterns which underlie social behavior (behavior which occurs in groups that have been ordered or organized over a reasonable length of time). When it takes the form of schooling, education can be said to occur in social groups which, over time, exhibit observable behavior. Qualitative inquiry delivers its truth value by a process called triangulation. Key to an understanding of qualitative inquiry is a consideration of grounded theory in which data drive theory, not vice versa. It is noted that qualitative research is not monolithic. Several pitfalls to avoid are noted, including how to cope with the chaos of data gathered without having made a priori assumptions. The importance of preserving the language of the respondents is stressed. It is noted that doing qualitative research entails persistently going back again and again to the sources in order to ensure that one has "got it right." Contains 22 references. (SM)

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THE QUALITATIVE DIMENSION

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The Qualitative Dimension

Since the twentieth century began, three research methodologies have described work in the field of education, and recently Jonas Soltis (1984) synthesized them into a coherent framework. Along the path to his framework Soltis develops three categories for current and future educational inquiry: the empirical, the interpretive, and the critical.

Empirical inquiry is fundamentally quantitative. It employs the language of logical positivism in an emulation of natural science methodology. Although there are contradictions and differing interpretations among its practitioners, empirical inquiry strives to be objective and value-free by focusing on isolated, disaggregated variables that are drawn from researchers' having made a priori assumptions about the molecular structure, as it were, of the thing being studied.

By contrast, interpretive inquiry is qualitative rather than quantitative. Also called hermeneutics after the Greek Hermes, god of messengers and meanings, qualitative inquiry strives to understand the ways that human consciousness operates in and on the world. Qualitative inquiry employs the methods of anthropology and ethnohistory toward understanding the patterns of relationships between education and culture.

Critical inquiry, the third research methodology, "has an

ideological content that is specifically recognized, even celebrated, and that sees other methodologies as ideological moments in the unfolding of human experience" (Howard 1988, p.12)). Researcher-scholars in this mode believe that the notion of a value-free science denies unity between theory and practice and is itself an ideological notion which stifles humankind's emancipatory interests. The purpose of critical inquiry, then, is to serve such emancipatory interests (Lather 1986) often by purging the other research methods of their so-called mystique or shamanism. In brief, critical inquiry seeks to demystify cultural institutions of which education is one.

It is not an overstatement to suggest, as does Soltis (1984), that no one educational researcher can function with equal sophistication in all three of these methodologies. As educational researchers, however, we all have a stake in seeing to it that all three are done - and properly. Otherwise, the efficacy of educational research is diminished.

The purpose of this essay is to explore the qualitative dimension of educational research methodology. As its synonym hermeneutics suggests, qualitative inquiry is concerned with meaning, with how people make meaning, and with how cultural meanings influence the patterns of human behavior and action. To deal with meaning, qualitative research uses quantitative methods when and where they are appropriate. That is, there is no attempt by any of us who work in this mode to substitute our analytical processes for those of the logical positivists. Actually we're

quite good at theft - Hermes was also the god of merchants, thieves, tricksters, magicians, and those who live at the edge- and we steal (read, borrow) whatever can make our research more meaningful. Thus, whenever a table or a statistic can add meaning to an analysis we use it, just as a logical positivist uses it to make his or her analysis more meaningful.

Unlike logical positivists, however, we tend not to isolate variables, preferring instead to look for patterns. We emphasize the patterns which are made by variables rather than the individual variable itself. In other words, we aggregate more than we disaggregate data. We also try not to make a priori assumptions, and instead search for underlying laws or principles that seem to explain (not predict) human behaviors and actions. Qualitative inquiry also borrows from critical inquiry in making every effort to unite theory and practice, although we stop short of overtly advocating emancipatory interests. In brief, the qualitative dimension of educational research is pragmatic in the sense that it uses processes from the other two dimensions as well as its own in order to make sense of the interrelationships between education and society.

My plan for this essay is to review the salient bibliography in the literature of qualitative methodology so that we as researchers may:

1. understand more fully the qualitative dimension as it, in turn, fits within the parameters of educational research as a whole, and

2. have more informed access to the sometimes daunting array of literature that confronts us when first we seek to become familiar with this research dimension.

ON QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

As academic disciplines, social and cultural anthropology function from either of two philosophical positions. The first, represented by Levi-Strauss (1963,1967), perceives and conceives culture (including language) functioning within the confines of the human mind. That is, a researcher espousing this philosophical stance operates from the premise that there is an innate propensity in the human mind and that the human mind is a black box to be opened. This is an oversimplified version, but in the main this perspective states that in order to understand how culture functions, one must first attempt to open the black box and understand what one can of the human mind.

The contrastive philosophical stance, represented by Radcliffe-Brown (1958) and Evans-Pritchard (1952) in the English tradition of social anthropology, maintains that perceptions and conceptions of culture and language rest on observable behavior. Researchers who espouse this philosophical stance - and I count myself among them - tend to define culture as what groups of people do (and language is observable as talk) , how they do it, and sometimes why they do it. This, too, is a oversimplified version, but this stance enables a researcher to engage

qualitative study with a reasonably good measure of objective detachment, moreso, I suspect, than one who rummages about in the black box of the human mind.

Culture is a term that has a panoply of meanings, which range from the intricate to the banal. For purposes of this essay I define culture in simple, non-technical, and everyday language: culture is the overall pattern of what groups of people do, how they do it, and sometimes why they do it that way instead of this way.

Qualitative research, then, aims at uncovering patterns which underly social behavior, i.e., behavior which occurs in groups that have been ordered or organized over a reasonable length of time. When it takes the form of schooling, education can be said to occur in social groups which, over time, exhibit observable behavior. Foremost in the methodology of education which deals with qualitative inquiry is Guba and Lincoln's Effective Evaluation (1981; see also Lincoln and Guba 1985, and Bogdan and Bilkin 1982). Guba and Lincoln (1981) maintain that qualitative inquiry uncovers patterns largely through the use of non-technical language and informal everyday reasoning in order to structure reality (p.78).

Earlier, English social anthropologist Evans-Pritchard (1958) made the same statement when he said that there are really very few special techniques to learn beyond those acquired in a traditional college education, and that it is far more important to record all the details of a culture regardless of their immediate usefulness and to view the whole of the culture, as a

whole, without being an arbiter (pp.76-87). In other words, a hallmark of qualitative inquiry is that the researcher should refrain from imposing on a culture an outside value schema that may not fit. To do so risks professional sanctions against engaging in cultural determinism, which means that the researcher has imposed his or her own value system on that of the culture being investigated..

Guba and Lincoln (1981, pp. 105-127) as well as Lincoln and Guba (1985, pp. 289-331) devote long passages to developing analogues between quantitative and qualitative analyses. This process, known generally as "establishing trustworthiness," lines out the analogues, for example, between quantitative's "internal and external validity" and qualitative's "credibility and applicability." Mainly and as all the literature agrees, qualitative inquiry delivers its truth value by a process called triangulation which (1)generally means that the data come from multiple sources and (2)specifically means that the data are gathered via three techniques of observation, documentation, and interviews. Of these, researchers agree that the most important source of data seems to be the interview. Nonetheless, each of these data sources acts as a cross-check on the other two, which is to say that a pattern that emerges from one source must also emerge from the other sources in order to satisfy what, in quantitative terms, are called validity and reliability.

Key, I believe, to an understanding of qualitative inquiry

is a consideration of grounded theory. From Glaser and Strauss (1967), Kaplan and Manners (1972), and Conrad (1978) we learn that grounded theory means that data drive theory, not the other way round. For sociocultural purposes, theory explains moreso than it predicts.

First, grounded theory means that theory emanates from data. That is, data drive toward theory, they do not derive from it. Grounded theory, then, is another hallmark of qualitative inquiry. Just as the researcher refrains from cultural determinism, he or she refrains from making a priori assumptions. Instead, although we as researchers recognize cultural values, we don't judge them. As well, we hope that theory will emerge, but we don't force it to emerge. And theory? As Kaplan and Manners (1972) maintain, theory explains. Specifically and in everyday terms, cultural theory helps us to understand - i.e., it explains - what groups of people do, how they do it, and sometimes why they do it. There is no attempt to have theory predict how people will behave.

We might also say that qualitative research is not monolithic. There are several types of qualitative investigations, as John Chilcott (1987) points out in his taxonomy, but cross-cutting all these types are features and criteria which are reasonably common. These criteria are listed by Mary Lee Smith (1987) who shows us that questions of "how much" and "how many" are the domain of quantitative analysis, and questions about the "what" of something fall into the

qualitative domain. Moreover, Smith continues, while representative sampling techniques are a hallmark of quantitative methodology, such a technique is often irrelevant to qualitative methodology. More to the point is the notion of the primary respondent.

Primary respondents are people whom qualitative researchers interview. The respondents (also called informants) are important because they have something of value to say about the social group or (sub)culture being investigated. Their statements always have worth simply because the respondents themselves are familiar with the context of the culture. As anthropologists, we identify primary respondents according to a time-honored metaphor. We climb to the highest place and survey the territory and the people's comings and goings in order to find a well-beaten path to a doorway. That well-beaten path usually leads to a primary respondent who leads us to another primary respondent who leads to another, and so on until enough data have been gathered - "enough" meaning that the pattern has emerged and is verified and verifiable by means of triangulation. Put simply, primary respondents are very special people because others seek them out.

PITFALLS TO AVOID

Few essays in the methodological literature genuinely confront problems that we as qualitative researchers face in the fieldwork and analytical stages. One of these problems is the

bandwagon or buzzword stance from which come serious research articles published in prestigious research journals. Although I shall not cite it, one of these articles began, "This is an ethnography drawn from 50 half-hour interviews taken over a three-week period from the teaching staffs . . ." I did not read past "the teaching staffs" because I'd learned that ethnography was a bit more than content-analyzing half-hour interviews done in less than a month. Doing ethnography is living in the culture for about a year and spending prolonged hours talking with the "interviewees." The writer of this piece should have said, "This study uses ethnographic techniques . . ."

In other words, there is a critical distinction between doing ethnography and using 'ethno' techniques as the scholarship of Fetterman (1984) indicates. Fetterman generally admonishes the researcher to make proper distinctions between, say, ethnography and ethnoanalytic techniques, and in the process reminds us to explore all multiple meanings without imposing a meaning of our own making. In short, as qualitative researchers we are required to see and report things as they are and not as we'd like them to be. Thus, coping with bandwagons and buzzwords means fully understanding the qualitative processes before giving them cute or clever labels.

Another problem the literature seems not to mention, except in passing, is how to cope with the chaos of data gathered without a researcher's having made <u>a priori</u> assumptions. Doing fieldwork does mean gathering a plethora of material, not all of

which proves penultimately useful for producing the finished research report, but, as much of the literature intimates (without actually making the statement) the cross-check process inherent in triangulation generally renders order to the initial chaos. Mostly, what's required is patience; one simply has to wait it out until the data make sense of themselves.

What else is required is "persistency of contacts," which Guba and Lincoln (1981) define as going back again and again to the data and/or the persons interviewed in order to ensure that data have been "got right." As examples, each day's fieldnotes are always transcribed and fleshed out each evening onto carefully coded (and legible) notecards; each quote or paraphrase is fed back to the respondent (often using the counseling ploy of "What I hear you say is . . .") so that he or she can ensure that the recasted statement has been got right, warts and all. In other words, one spends an inordinate lot of time with one's data, much of it chaotic because there are no a priori controls and because the researcher is driving toward theory, not from it. Living with chaos is like grabbing a handful of fog. It wrenches the viscera. It is painful. Eventually, after fits of false starts though, the fog begins to lift and one sees trees, then a recognizeable forest which becomes an entity, a forest, say, of loblolly pine. Coping with chaos takes patience; you must restrain yourself from imposing an arbitrary control apparatus over the data before they are ready to take control of themselves.

PRESERVING THEIR LANGUAGE

Perhaps I can add to the methodological literature in this area of coping with chaos with the phrase preserve their language, "their" meaning respondents. Preserving their language is the most significant theme I can offer for meeting the tests of research rigor. Preserving the language exists on two levels, however. The first is the word and this is the literal level. It means that one returns constantly to the sources in order to stay honest and on track. By "sources" I mean not just interviews and not just observations, but documents wherever they occur and whatever form they occur in, including the methodological literature. It is the literal level of preserving the language that creates in an audience a sense of reality such that they nod their heads and say, "Yes, that's the way it is."

The second level of preserving the language is more abstract than the level of just words, since words are strung together to form sentences and paragraphs that, in turn, convey contexts and meanings. Preserving the language at this level is preserving the system, "system" meaning the context in which the strings of words deliver meaning. At first, preserving the system means uncovering categories that seem to stack up to the system as a whole. That is, by triangulating one unearths certain regularities and redundancies which become categories. At this

point the methodology is reductionist; it seems to break the whole into its component parts. But analysis is not complete until one takes the second step of putting the parts back together again so as to see the pattern of the whole. Reconstituting the system means imbuing its components with their multiple meanings using expansionist strategies. And the end result of preserving the language *qua* system is and probably should be a gestalt, ambiguities and all.

TOWARD CONCLUDING

It remains for me to cast all these methodological strategems, techniques, and caveats into the real world of doing qualitative research in educational settings. To recapitulate, doing qualitative research in education is like doing social anthropology; its purpose is to uncover the patterns of what groups of people do, how they do it, and sometimes why they do it. We strive to attain this purpose by observing and talking with the people and, when possible, reading their records of themselves - all this without imposing our own idiosyncratic bias. Doing qualitative research is also like grabbing a handful of fog and expecting it to live at your command and reveal the tangibles it hides. Finally doing qualitative research is persistently going back again and again to the sources in order to ensure that one has "got it right."

Let me illustrate with a case study: I've spent the past two years trying to understand what happens to doctoral students

enrolled in programs for the study of higher education. At least eighteen months of that trial was living with chaos, returning at least three times to my primary respondents with reports about what I thought was going on when doctoral students in these programs underwent socialization into the academic profession. Finally, last November, an "AHA!" sneaked in sideways, waggled its fingers at me, and said, "Here I am."

That AHA! was so simple, so clear, and made so much good sense that I could have kicked myself for not having seen it sooner. I felt much as Henri Poincare, the mathematician must have felt when, after his AHA! on the Paris bus, lowered his umbrella and walked home in the rain, sat down, and wrote out the equations for Fuchsian algebra (see Ghiselin, 1952).

As did Poincare, I'd learned my craft, retained a skepticism about absolutes, insisted on iconoclastic play, and found that all the effort paid off in the moment of dazzling truth which characterizes the creative process. And, just as Poincare found that writing out his equations took a good bit of time, so I found that spinning out the details of a doctoral student's rites of passage (van Gennep, 1908) into the academic profession took a book's worth of time. Still, the AHA! was there and the rest has been simply a matter of gluing one's seat to a chair and writing it out.

All the apparently chaotic data I had gathered began to accommodate the schema of the AHA! I learned what doctoral students do, how they do it, and sometimes why. I also learned

the same about faculty in higher education programs. I learned what makes for degree completion and I learned what the outcomes are when a student does complete the doctorate. I learned all this via the qualitative dimension.

Meanwhile, back in Columbus, Ohio, two colleagues named Jean Girves and Virginia Wemmerus (1988) were working empirically (i.e., via the quantitative dimension) to apply the Tinto (1975) model of undergraduate attrition/retention to the graduate level, masters and doctoral degrees. If you were to juxtapose their findings with regard to what happens to doctoral students across nearly all subject-matter areas (pp. 183-185) with the findings I reported recently in England (Peters 1988) you would see that both sets of findings were quite similar. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses revealed that involvement with the doctoral program was far more important for completing the degree than grades received.

Yet it is not nearly so important that both sets of findings are similar as it is that each research method yields different insights which developed from our different methodological approaches. We complement each other: Where Girves and Wemmerus state that involvement is a statistically significant factor in degree completion, I describe the nature and context of such involvement - i.e., what it looks and feels like from different perspectives as well as an organizational schema on which to hang the details of involvement. Where they demonstrate an area for future research, I point out pertinent questions that future

researchers might ask.

In other words, if getting the same answer were the only driving force behind using different methodologies, then there would be little sense in having different methodologies or in debating their respective worths. What is important, however, is not getting the answer but asking the kinds of questions which mandate uncovering different insights along the way to an answer. It is these different insights drawn from different categories of educational research methodology that make for efficacy in the totality of educational research.

Thus we are come full circle. There are, as Soltis (1984) says, categories of educational research, and we all have a stake in seeing to it that all categories are engaged and engaged in properly. Otherwise the efficacy of educational research is diminished, for then reality becomes distorted. In short, to focus on one dimension or category, and only one dimension, distorts reality. As educators we need the full complement of all three dimensions.

I, for example, do not have the sophistication in quantitative methodology for carrying out much of anything beyond ANOVAs and Chi-Squares. I do have a stake in those who can, however. And I'll say that multiple regressions and discriminant analyses are as revelatory in their way as, say, Paolo Freire's (1985) critical uncovering of the banking concept of education is revelatory in its way. My revelatory strength lies in the classical tradition of meanings and metaphors.

Altogether, the empiricists, the interpreters, and the radicals serve the educational research community by keeping each other honest. Without such honesty educational research is diminished in outlook, lacking in insight, and devoid of integrity. Let us, then, honor and respect all methodologies while, simultaneously, retaining a healthy skepticism about them.

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